Analog Obsolescence and the 'Death of Cinema' Debate: The Case of Experimental Film

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Introduction: New Media and Obsolescence

In the introduction to a recent volume of essays entitled *Residual Media*, Charles R. Acland openly criticizes 'contemporary scholarship's fetishization of the "new,"' stating:

> An inappropriate amount of energy has gone into the study of new media, new genres, new communities, and new bodies, that is into the contemporary forms. Often, the methods of doing so have been at the expense of taking account of continuity, fixity and dialectical relations with existing practices, systems and artifacts.[1]

Unfortunately, and surprisingly, none of the nineteen essays in the book addresses this issue in relation to the cinema and its now almost universal transition from analog to digital technology. Current scholarship in the field of Film Studies, like many other Arts disciplines, is increasingly dominated by attempts to grasp, interpret and theorize technological change through a host of increasingly familiar terms such as 'new media', 'convergence culture' and 'remediation'. Although these publications vary greatly – from the historical or 'archaeological' perspectives of Lev Manovich, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, to the philosophical-theoretical explorations of D. N. Rodowick and Mark Hansen[2] –, all tend to overlook the more complex dialectical relationship between the old and the new, where notions of 'impact' are not a one-way, but a two-way process.

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[1] Charles R. Acland*, Residual Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. xix-xx.
[2] See: Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 2001); Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press); D. N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or Philosophy After the New Media* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2001); Mark B. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 2004).

Clearly, we do need new paradigms and theories for understanding the impact of the digital in creating new modes of film production, distribution, exhibition and aesthetics. My view, however, like that expressed by Acland, is that in the heady rush to embrace and theorize the 'new,' we have neglected to consider the wider cultural, economic and ideological implications of recent technological change, including the ever-changing notion of the 'old' and its precarious position in both culture and society.

Cultural obsolescence involves a complex web of technological consumption and consumer commodity economics obscured by a 'liberatory and democratizing utopian rhetoric' of the new.[3] 'Thus the digital spreads, infiltrates, overwhelms, conquers all other media,' states Philip Rosen, 'but, like many modern conquerors, does so in the name of liberation, liberation from constraint.'[4] This connection between the cultural and the social is also highlighted by Evan Watkins, who argues that, 'obsolescence is an ideologically produced designation. To study the *production* of obsolescence necessarily means to attend to social and cultural processes.'[5] Watkins' compelling account of obsolescence and consumer culture highlights crucial parallels with the marginalization of particular social groups, drawing conclusions that are much more far-reaching and politically inflected than most of the old versus new technology debates that tend to dominate discussions of contemporary cultural production, especially within the realms of cinema.

New media theorists rarely tackle the intricate dialectics of media change beyond an historical-theoretical standpoint that reinforces the cultural dominance of the new, whilst, in my view, contributing to the quickening of the process of obsolescence by reaffirming discourses of the 'old'. Often, this is couched in narratives of continuity from the analog to the digital, which see new media as furthering the goals of 'old' practices, not simply replacing them, but realizing their desires through necessary technological progress – precisely the 'liberation from constraint' to which Rosen draws attention. Slavoj Žizek refers to this discourse as 'the historiography of a kind of *future anteriéur*

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[3] Simon Penny, 'Consumer Culture and the Technological Imperative: The Artist in Dataspace,' in *Critical Issues in Electronic Media* (SUNY Press, 1995).
[4] Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity and Theory* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 324.
[5] Evan Watkins, *Throwaways: Work Culture and Consumer Education* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 27-28. This view is reinforced in Giles Slades compelling history of the relationship between obsolescence and commodity culture, *Made to Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2006).

(future perfect),'[6] and Lev Manovich is a key proponent of this approach. In his now widely quoted book *The Language of New Media*, he states:

> A hundred years after cinema's birth, cinematic ways of seeing the world, of structuring time, of narrating a story, of linking one experience to the next, have become the basic means by which computer users access and interact with all cultural data. In this respect, the computer fulfills the promise of cinema as a visual Esperanto – a goal that preoccupied many film artists and critics in the 1920s.[7]

This association, the assertion that 'we're not so different from you after all,' is highly problematic in the sense that it encourages the understanding of digital technology as simply a replacement for film, in much the same way as the computer replaced the typewriter, CDs replaced vinyl and the e-book is gradually replacing printed material. Yet, as D. N. Rodowick has pointed out, this approach has actually prevented the digital from finding its own autonomous creative voice as a medium with distinct technical properties and possibilities.[8] Special effects aside, the majority of mainstream (and even art house) films shot on digital cameras could equally have been shot on film, since the visual fabric of the work essentially remains the same. With manufacturers of digital cameras continually striving to recreate the 'look' of film, it is now often virtually impossible to distinguish between one medium and another (I am reminded here of the T-1000 cyborg in the film *Terminator 2*, which, made of liquid metal, can mimic the shape and appearance of people and objects with which it comes into contact. Interestingly, it was one of the first films to make extensive use of digital imaging techniques, allowing us to consider it in terms of a wider meta-narrative about technological transition and obsolescence). 'The deepest paradox of perceptual realism in the emergence of digital cinema,' states Rodowick, 'is its presentation of images that appear to be, and want to be, "photographic" only more so.'

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[6] Slavoj Zizek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington, Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities, 2000), p. 29.
[7] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 78-79.
[8] D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2007).

The Abject Body of Film

Inseparable from discourses on the end of celluloid, and thus the 'death of cinema' as we know it, is the emphasis on another form of death inherent to the medium itself. Discussions of new technology and the 'future' of cinema frequently centre on the infinite durability of the digital in contrast to the limited lifespan and decaying physical substrate of celluloid. As Rodowick observes: 'Cinema is inherently an autodestructive medium [...] Each passage of frames through a projector – the very machine that gives filmophanic/projected life to the moving image – advances a process of erosion that will eventually reduce the image to nothing.'[9] Interestingly, this dichotomy between analog and digital technology frequently hinges on metaphors of the body, where the 'fleshy' interface of celluloid, which bears the visible traces of aging on its scratched and scarred body, is seen as analogous to our own restrictive, unreliable and ultimately unstable 'wetware.' 'Moving image preservation,' laments Paulo Cherchi Usai in *The Death of Cinema*, 'will be redefined as the science of gradual loss and the art of coping with the consequences, very much like a physician who has accepted the inevitability of death, even while he fights for the patient's life.'[10] Well before the advent of digital technologies, Roland Barthes had conceived of photography in the same terms, describing the medium as, 'mortal: like a living organism, it is born on the level of the sprouting silver grains, it flourishes a moment, then ages [...], fades, weakens, vanishes [...] there is nothing left to do but throw it away.'[11] The contemporary relevance of Barthes' theoretical writings to discussions of technological obsolescence, particularly in re-conceptualising filmic ontology, is now well documented and I will not rehearse these arguments here.[12] Rather, I would like to explore Barthes' comment from a slightly different angle: that of the continuation and reinvention of celluloid-based expression in experimental film practice.

The process, suggested by Barthes, by which the subject separates him or herself from the dead or lost object calls to mind Sigmund Freud's account of mourning and melancholia.[13] Crucially, what distinguishes mourning from the pathological state of

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[9] Ibid., p. 125.

[10] Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of the Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* (London : Reaktion Books, 2001), p. 105.

[11] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), p.

[12] See, for example, Laura Mulvey, *Death 24X a Second* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006).

[13] Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1923), pp. 239-258.

melancholia, in Freud's view, is the ability to sever its attachment to the object that has been abolished. Thus, states Laura Marks:

> Barthes finds that the mortality of his photographs their blurriness, fading and decay, render them unbearably abject […] the photograph must be rejected, lest its mortality contaminate the life of the viewer. In what seems like an understandable and "healthy" conclusion to mourning, Barthes throws the old photograph away.[14]

It is not difficult, then, to link these themes of mourning and melancholia to issues of obsolescence, particularly within the context of the 'death' of cinema and its replacement by cheaper, more accessible and ostensibly more stable digital technologies. Acceptance of, and compliance with, the linear film-to-digital narrative corresponds to a 'healthy' separation from 'old' media and from the 'abject' physical object, an observation that rings especially true when we consider the excessive throwaway culture in which we now live. This might seem like a rather simplistic analogy, but it nonetheless helps us to understand current celluloid practice as what Marks terms 'loving a disappearing image,'[15] or, more specifically in this context, loving a disappearing medium. This involves not recoiling from the abject decaying body of film, but rather embracing it as an inevitable part of the life-death cycle, the 'state of constant dissolution.'[16]

It is precisely this awareness that in many ways counteracts the non-organic, artificial nature of digital media and its capacity for infinite reproduction. As Janet Murray has argued, the virtual world is one of non-closure that is at odds with our corporeal existence:

> The refusal of closure is always, at some level, a refusal to face mortality. Our fixation on electronic games and stories is in part an enactment of this denial of death. They offer us the chance to erase memory, to start over, to replay an event and try for a different resolution. In this respect, electronic media have the

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[14] Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 105.
[15] Marks, 'Loving a Disappearing Image,' in *Touch*, pp. 91-110.
[16] Ibid. p. 110.

advantage of enacting a deeply cosmic vision of life, a vision of retrievable mistakes and open options.[17]

This is an issue raised by Marks in her discussion of faded films and decaying videotapes. 'These images appeal to a look that does not recoil from death,' she argues, 'but acknowledges death as part of our being.'[18] The films I will discuss here are illustrative of a wider tendency in experimental filmmaking, of a continued interest in the film material, not, I argue, as a nostalgic rarification of old practices (as now frequently seen in gallery installations[19], but as a way of better understanding media obsolescence – the effects of obsolescence *on* the obsolete object, the ways in which it is used and the new creative impulses to which it gives rise. These works pose fundamental questions about our relationship with the physical world and celebrate, rather than lament, film as a (living and dying) body. Finally, they can also be read as reflections on the environmental impact of technological progress, using the scarred tissue of the celluloid body as a metaphor for our equally scarred and fragile planet.

Engaging Materiality

Materiality and artisanal practice (where process becomes content) have long been a feature of experimental cinema – from Man Ray's rayogram technique in *Le Retour à la raison* (1923), through the animation of Len Lye and Norman McLaren to the hand-painted works of Stan Brakhage, and, of course the films of the English structural-materialists Malcolm Le Grice, Annabel Nicholson, Guy Sherwin and Lis Rhodes. Materialist film relies on the experiential as an integral part of filmmaking process, which, to quote the filmmaker Daniel Barnett, 'requires an active and physical bonding between the maker and the product by way of the material substrate itself.'[20] The film is a physical testimony of the artist's intricate, painstaking work on the surface of the celluloid, the

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[17] Janet H. Murray, quoted in Zizek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime*, p. 47.

[18] Marks, p. 91.

[19] In *The Virtual Life of Film*, Rodowick draws our attention to the fact that as celluloid disappears from commercial practice it re-emerges in new forms and in new contexts. 'Fabricated from a precious metal and installed in galleries and museums, where they are meant to be viewed in unique situations as autonomous artworks, films are regaining a sense of aura, and, finally, film is becoming Art.'[19] What is alarming about this statement is the way it seems to ignore, or treat as insignificant, a whole field of celluloid-based filmmaking that has been 'art' for a long time, occupying spaces other than that of the gallery. This kind of fetishization of the old is arguably no less problematic than the fetishization of the new.

[20] Daniel Barnett, *Movement as Meaning in Experimental Film* (New York; Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), p. 110.

trace of which is felt in the uneven, raw quality of the finished product. The process *is* the film, which continually reasserts its own tactile character. In his 'Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film' of 1976, Peter Gidal laid out the terms of materialist filmmaking as 'non-illusionist,' and as a political practice that disrupts the 'mechanism of identification' characteristic of the commercial 'cinema of consumption.'[21] Thirty-five years on, and in the context of digital imaging and celluloid obsolescence, the terms of this argument have shifted considerably. Contemporary materialist film is arguably no less political, but it is now almost inevitably positioned, whether consciously or not, in opposition or as a response to the changing landscape of cinema production. As Tess Takahashi points out in her study of recent American experimental film, tellingly entitled 'After the Death of Film', 'the cinematic avant-garde's interest in celluloid film's materiality goes to the heart of our culture's current anxiety about the digital ability to seamlessly transcode, endlessly reproduce and recklessly disseminate images of all stripes.'[22] This view is also expressed by Marks, who states in relation to the video works she discusses, 'Paradoxically, the age of so-called virtual media has hastened the desire for indexicality,' producing, 'a retrospective fondness for the "problems" of decay and generational loss [in analog media].'[23] What Marks terms 'analog nostalgia,' however, can (and must) be understood as more than a simple 'yearning for yesterday,' to quote Fred Davis.[24] Nor is it helpful to consider these films as representing a (one might say reactionary) stance *against* digital filmmaking. Contemporary materialist film evolves *in relation to* new technology and, as such, demands to be incorporated into theories of media change, cinematic representation and, more specifically, embodied viewing.

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[21] Peter Gidal, 'Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film,' in Structural Film Anthology, ed. Peter Gidal (London: BFI, 1976), pp. 1-4.
[22] Takahashi, 'After the Death of Film: Writing the Natural World in the Digital Age,' *Visible Language* 42 (1), January 2008.
[23] Marks, p. 152.
[24] Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: Free Press, 1979).

In Alia Syed's *Priya* (2009) unprocessed film stock, featuring an aerial shot of a north Indian classical dancer, was buried in the ground for several days, allowing the humidity of the soil and the plant life contained within it to penetrate the 'emulsion-skin' of the film. This gesture of burying arose specifically from the artist's frustration with what she described as the 'fundamental non-tactility' of digital filmmaking, but also with the 'inherent beauty' of the figurative image. It also, more importantly, engages with the 'death of cinema' discourse by, in a sense, laying the body to rest. But here, of course, there is an afterlife, the rebirth of the film in a new creative form, a process that also functions as a metaphor for the wider status of film in the age of digital reproduction. The body of the dancer (the images of which were registered before the burial process) thus fuses with the body of the film, and the repetitive movement represents the infinite cycle of life and death. The ritualistic nature of the act of burying is foregrounded in the repetitive ritualistic motion of the dancer, whose figurative contours are gradually obscured by the deterioration of the filmstrip, manifested in flamboyant bursts of colour and texture. Furthermore, by burying the film, Syed effectively 'kills' the cliché of the image by literally penetrating and debasing its glossy surface, possibly drawing attention to the fact that what defines film is not the 'look' – that which digital media seek to emulate – but the physicality of its material. Indeed, Syed herself has explicitly suggested that the process offered her a way of 'working through the differences between film and video.'[25]

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[25] 'Conversation Pieces: Alia Syed,' Tate Britain, May 21, 2010.

Similar concerns are present in Emmanuel Lefrant's *Parties Visible et Invisible d'Un Ensemble Sous Tension* (2009), the title of which refers to a text by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Here, a strip of film figuratively depicting an African landscape is combined with a second strip that was buried in the exact same location of shooting. The two images are brought together in a complex procedure of double exposure and bi-packing, a process that, again, emphasises the physicality of the medium. Through this fusion, the film's indexical link to reality is doubly inflected - the landscape is registered on both a visual and a physical level, where the visible and the invisible become part of the same image. Like Syed's *Priya*, the buried film remembers and 'speaks' the experience of its physical contact with the earth and bears the indexical traces of time.

Directly staging the 'death' of the film is not restricted to the act of burying. In David Gatten's *What the Water Said, nos. 1-3* (1997), made in the area of his childhood family vacations in South Carolina – at the southern tip of Seabrook Island where the Edisto River joins the Atlantic – the living body of the film is submerged, literally drowned in water so that it may be reborn through the elements. In the making of the film, Gatten placed unspooled rolls of film stock in a crab trap, 'throw[ing] the trap into the surf at various times for various durations so that the ocean itself would inscribe both image and sound onto the filmstrip.'[26] The effects of this process in the different sections of the film vary depending on the film stocks used, the weather, the conditions of the tide, and the length of time spent in the water. Dense scratches, coloured organic shapes and black and white flecks are accompanied by a

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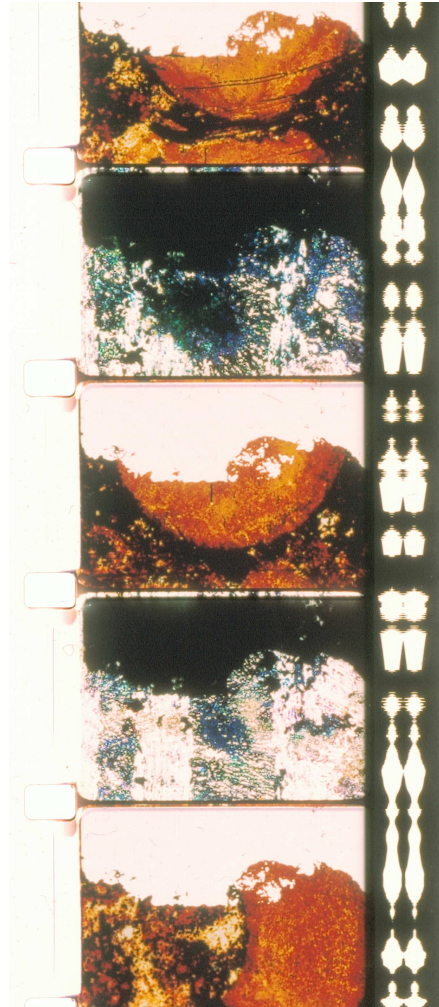
[26] Scott MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Experimental Films about Place* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2001), p. 374.

layered soundtrack 'reminiscent of ocean waves,'[27] that translate the tactile experience of submersion to the body of the viewer. But, as Scott MacDonald states,

> Whatever the effects Gatten's flinging the crap trap into the sea would have created, his gesture […] reveals not only a faith in the possibility of collaborating with the environment in a more direct way, but a confidence in the ongoing capacity of a remnant of the mechanical age to continue to bring body and spirit together.[28]

McDonald's observation is crucial in understanding Gatten's film, as well as the films of Syed and Lefrant, as examples of the widespread contemporary (re-)assessment of the relationship between technology and the body, art and the environment.

So, if these films are a reflection on the fragility of the film material, they also function as environmental allegories. The obsolescence of film therefore becomes a metaphor for another, more terrifying, obsolescence. In *Parties Visible et Invisible* the traces of biochemical decay are transposed directly onto the figurative image, bestowing on the landscape an ethereal beauty, expressed only through the language of celluloid. But it is precisely this transposition that also speaks of environmental disaster – the decay, not only of the cinematic material, but also of the earth itself. Behind the beauty of the image thus lies another story of death from which we certainly cannot recoil. The two films by Gatten and Lefrant are fundamentally about place and the role of film in providing a document of a subjective experience of that place, but they can also be read as complex meditations on the relationship between technology and the environment, and the wider implications of media transition and obsolescence. Contemporary materialist film can be seen, in part, as a reflection on the ontological differences between analog and digital media – if we buried a hard drive in the ground for days on end there would be little chance of rebirth in any creative form! But corrosion, deterioration and decay are not merely aesthetic devices for producing beautiful images; they are also ways of thinking

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid, p. 375.

through our own bodies, our own mortality and our relationship to the outside world. In the realms of the digital we tend to lose sight of these issues. The alarming regularity with which people now upgrade computers, mobile phones, television sets, iPods and other electronic goods leads to a culture of waste that Jonathan Sterne calls 'the other side of innovation.'[29] This darker side of technological progress forces us to consider not only cultural instability but also environmental instability and the inextricable relationship between creative and environmental destruction. As Giles Slade argues: 'We are standing on the precipice of an insurmountable e-waste storage problem that no landfill program so far imagined will be able to solve.'[30]

Conclusion

I began this paper with a discussion of technological obsolescence and the general tendency of cultural criticism to place disproportionate emphasis on the new, neglecting to consider the effects of media change from the perspective of both the new *and* the old. Contemporary experimental filmmaking, I have argued, offers ways of thinking through the current status of film by foregrounding an aesthetic of materiality that speaks directly of the impact of digital. By embracing, rather than denying mortality, materialist film practice engages with the body of the film not as a morbid resignation to the inevitability of death, but rather as a vital life force that is still capable of translating and animating both a physical and spiritual experience of the world. But this is not to claim the artistic merits of one technology over the other – a rehearsing of the reductive celluloid versus digital debate – but to argue for a creative co-existence of two distinct and equally valuable art forms. We need to understand the changing landscape of art in the digital era, but this means taking into account the current plurality of practice. In the realms of film, this means understanding materiality as an art of engagement, a new self-reflexive language that highlights the importance and continued relevance of film-as-film in contemporary culture.

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[29] Jonathan Steele, "Out with the Trash: On the Future of New Media," in *Residual Media*, p. 27.
[30] Giles Slade, *Made to Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 264.